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ABSTRACT

The role of affect in information processing has recently received attention, and several possible influences of affect have been suggested. The informational and directive effects of affect were investigated with subjects (N=61) who either described events in their recent past that made them feel good, described events that made them feel bad, or gave no description of life-events. Additionally, subjects expected to be put in either a good or a bad mood as a result of an external factor, or had no expectations concerning their mood. Describing positive life-events increased reported happiness and life satisfaction relative to a control group, while describing negative life-events decreased the indices of well-being. The impact of describing negative events was eliminated when subjects expected to feel bad due to an external influence, but was nonsignificantly increased when subjects expected to feel good because of an external influence. Subjects describing positive life-events were not affected by mood expectation manipulations. Results suggest that persons use perceptions of their affective states in judgments of well-being, and that affective states have a directive effect on the search for and use of information. (Author/NRB)

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Mood, Misattribution, and Judgments of Well-Being: Informative and Directive-Effects of Affective States

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Mood, Misattribution, and Judgments of Well-Being: Informational and Directive Effects of Affective States

The role of affect in information processing has recently received some attention, and a variety of possible influences of affect have been suggested. Specifically, it has been proposed that affect might have an informational value (Wyer & Carlston, 1979), that it might direct one's attention to specific classes of information (Wyer & Carlston, 1979), and that it might increase the availability of affect congruent information (Bower, 1981, Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978).

In the present study we are interested in the informational and directive effects of affect. We want to explore how affective states are used in judgments of happiness and satisfaction with one's own life. Specifically, we are interested in how remembering happy or sad events in one's own recent past affects judgments of well-being. In earlier studies we had found that remembering happy events made some people happy but some other people unhappy. It seemed that the more vivid a person's description of the happy event, the more likely it was that the person reported being happy. One possible explanation of this result is that giving a vivid description is more likely to change a person's affective state than giving a pallid description. Thus, if persons use their affective state at the time of judgment in deciding whether their life is happy or not. this might account for our results. In the present study, we tried to test this idea more systematically.

We asked our subjects to give vivid descriptions of happy or sad events in their own recent past. Presumably, this will have two effects:

On the one hand, it should increase the cognitive availability of positive or negative events, and on the other hand, it should change subjects' mood. To isolate the effect of mood, we provided some of our subjects with a chance to misattribute their mood to an external factor unrelated to the events they described or their thoughts about them. Specifically, in a 2 x 3 - factorial design subjects were asked to describe a recent event that had made them feel either "really bad" or "really good", and they were either led to expect positive feelings as a result of an external cause, negative feelings as a result of this cause, or were given no external expectations. I will describe in a minute how this was done. Finally, subjects of a non-factorial control group did not describe any life-events prior to their judgments.

We expected that subjects who described negative life-events would generally report being less happy and satisfied than subjects who did not describe any life-events, whereas subjects who described positive life-events would report being more happy and satisfied than the control group. Moreover, we predicted that both discounting and augmentation effects would result from the expectation manipulation, (Kelley, 1971). That is, describing negative life-events should lead subjects to feel more happy and satisfied about their life when they have a chance to attribute the resulting bad feelings to an external cause, but it should lead them to feel much worse when they expected the external factors to put them into a good mood.

Similarly, subjects describing positive life-events might report lower well-being when expectations lead them to misattribute their good mood to external factors and higher well-being when they expect external

factors to put them in a bad mood.

However, an additional consideration is suggested by Wyer and Carlston (1979). They argue that unpleasant affective states may motivate persons to seek explanations that reduce their unpleasantness, but that persons in pleasant affective states may not be motivated to seek explanations for their mood. If this is the case, our misattribution manipulation should affect only subjects who described negative life-events but not subjects who described positive life-events.

Let us now consider the procedural details.

Method

Sixty-one undergraduates participated in a study that was purportedly concerned with memory for sounds. Subjects, who were run in groups of three or four, were seated in a small, unusual looking soundproof room. Subjects given a bad mood expectation were then told that participants in an earlier study had complained about feeling "tense" and "depressed" in that room. In contrast, subjects given a good mood expectation were told that earlier participants felt "elated" and "kind of high" while in the room, perhaps because of its soundproof quality. Subjects in these conditions were then told that the department of psychology wanted to find out what caused these feelings and were asked to rate the room for comfort, lighting, and so on. For a third group of subjects no expectations concerning effects of the room were introduced.

Following these ratings, subjects were exposed to a series of three-note tonal progressions as part of the "sound memory task", and then asked to collaborate on a 25-minute filler task prior to the sound recognition test. The "sound memory task" provided an excuse for running

the experiment in a sound proofed room. The filler task actually constituted the main part of the study. Specifically, subjects were asked to collaborate on the development of a "Life Event Inventory", purportedly a test instrument to assess events in people's life. They were asked to describe "as vividly and in as much detail as possible" a recent event that made them feel "really good", or one that made them feel "really bad". These descriptions were said to provide the basis for the generation of items of the Life-Event Inventory. Following these descriptions, subjects were asked to respond to some general questions that would allegedly help in selecting appropriate response scales for the test. These questions were measures of well-being, previously used in surveys (cf. Andrews and McKennel, 1980) consisting of 7 or 11 - point rating scales of different graphical design. These measures were used as the dependent variables.

Subjects of a separate control group responded to these same dependent variables prior to describing life-events.

Finally, subjects were given a sound recognition test, probed for suspiciousness, and fully debriefed.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean responses to the question "How happy do you feel about your life as a whole?" on a scale where 1 means "unhappy" and 7 means "happy".

Generally, subjects who described positive life-events reported significantly higher happiness ($\underline{M}$ = 6.5) than subjects who described negative events ($\underline{M}$ = 4.5, $\underline{F}(1,54) = 59.2$, $\underline{p} < .001$). Moreover, subjects reporting positive events felt more happy than the control group, whereas

subjects reporting negative events felt less happy than the control group, and both differences are reliable at the 1% level ($t(54)=3.1$, resp. $t(54)= 2.7$, $p < .01$).

More interesting, however, is a significant interaction of the description task and the room manipulations, $F(2,54) = 10.6$, $p < .001$. To diagnose this interaction, simple effects analyses were performed on data obtained under each description task condition separately.

Let us first consider the data of subjects who described negative life-events. Among these subjects the effect of the room manipulations was significant, $F(2,54) = 15.7$, $p < .001$. Specifically, subjects who expected to feel bad due to the room reported being happier about their life as a whole ($M = 6.1$) than subjects who expected no side-effects of the room ($M = 4.2$, $p < .05$, Newman-Keuls Test). Indeed, the mean response of subjects who had a chance to attribute bad feelings to the room is not significantly different from the overall mean response of subjects who described positive life-events ($M = 6.1$ and 6.5, respectively). On the other hand, subjects who expected to feel "elated" or "kind of high" due to the room seem to be non-significantly less happy ($M = 3.6$) than subjects who expected no side-effects ($M = 4.1$). Thus, we found a strong discounting effect and a slight augmentation effect in the happiness judgments of subjects who described what made them feel bad.

Does this hold as well for subjects who described what made them feel good? It does not. In this case, no effects of the room manipulation are significant ($F < 1$). Thus we neither find an augmentation effect when subjects expected to feel bad due to the room, nor do we find a discounting effect when subjects expected to feel elated due to the room.

The pattern of the satisfaction judgments is virtually identical to the pattern of the happiness judgments, as shown in Table 2. Thus, the conclusions drawn above apply both to judgments of happiness and judgments of general life-satisfaction.

Discussion

What do these data tell us?

First, the data suggest that persons may use their affective responses to their life as a primary basis for judging their well-being. That is, the impact of salient life-events on judgments of happiness and satisfaction seems to be mediated by the impact of these events on a person's mood at the time of judgment.

Second, persons do not always bother to explain their affective states. Rather, they may engage in explanations only if they are in an unpleasant state. In the present study, subjects sought and used information about possible external influences on their mood only if they were in a bad mood, but not if they were in a good mood.

A third question concerns whether subjects' inferences are motivationally biased or not. The answer to this question is less clear. On the one hand, some data suggest a motivational bias; namely the weakness of the augmentation effect and the surprising strength of the discounting effect for subjects who described negative life-events. Specifically, subjects who described negative life-events and expected the room to make them feel elated were only slightly and nonsignificantly less happy than subjects expecting no side-effects of the room. But when subjects describing negative life-events expected the room to make them feel tense they were as happy as subjects who reported positive events.

This suggests that they attributed their bad mood solely to the room rather than to both plausible causes, that is, to the room and to what they thought about. This is consistent with the results of misattribution research on the consequences of counterattitudinal behavior in which attitude change is eliminated rather than attenuated if the person can attribute tense feelings to a cause other than her own behavior (for a review see Zanna and Cooper, 1976; Wyer and Carlston, 1979). On the other hand, this extreme discounting effect would also be expected if persons process the information without a motivational bias but use a truncated search process (Wyer, 1980). Moreover, the weakness of the augmentation effect might be due to a lower plausibility of feeling "elated" as compared to feeling "tense" in the sound-proof room used in this study.

Therefore, additional research will be needed to assess if persons process information bearing on the quality of their life in a motivationally biased manner. These results do suggest, however, that subjects use their momentary mood as a basis for making life satisfaction and happiness judgments and that they will avail themselves of opportunities to misattribute their mood only when the mood is negative, positive moods apparently do not stimulate such explanatory activity.

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Table 1

Mean Happiness Ratings by Condition

	Mood Expectation		
	"Tense"	None	"Elated"
Description			
positive	$6.5_{a,b}$	$6.4_{a,b}$	6.7_{a}
negative	$6.1_{a,b}$	4.1_{c}	$3\ 6_{c}$
			Control Group 5.5_{b}

Note. The table presents the mean responses to the question "How happy do you feel about your life as a whole?" with 1= "unhappy" and 7 = "happy". N per condition is 8, except for the control group where N is 13.

Means not sharing the same subscript differ at $p < .05$, Newman-Keuls test.

Table 2

Mean Satisfaction Ratings by Condition

	Mood Expectation		
Description	"Tense"	None	"Elated"
positive	9.6_a	8.6_a	9.7_a
negative	8.6_a	5.7_b	4.4_b
		Control Group	8.9_a

Note. The table presents the mean responses to the question "All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" with 1 = "dissatisfied" and 11 = "satisfied". Means not sharing the same subscript differ at $p < .05$, Newman-Keuls Test. The analysis of variance indicates significant main effects for description ($F(1,54) = 32.8$, $p < .001$), mood expectation ($F(2,54) = 6.2$, $p < .005$), and a significant description x mood expectation interaction ($F(2,54) = 5.6$, $p < .01$). Simple effects analyses indicate a significant effect of mood expectation under negative description conditions ($F(2,54) = 10.8$, $p < .001$) but not under positive description conditions ($F < 1$).